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Mubarak uneasy about right-hand man's popularity

By Martin Sieff
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When 22,000 Egyptian policemen in the Central Security Force went on a rampage in February, a harassed President Hosni Mubarak fell back on a popular new solution to his country's woes: He sent for Abu Ghazala.

Field Marshal Abdel Hamid Abu Ghazala, Egypt's charismatic and widely respected defense minister, was called upon to deploy the army and restore order.

The whole operation was handled in classic Abu Ghazala style — with crisp, decisive efficiency. The army put down the mutiny. It patrolled the streets of Cairo. And then it obeyed orders and went straight back to barracks. The contrast with the mutiny-plagued security forces could not have been plainer and the lesson was not lost on either Mr. Mubarak or his minister of defense.

There have been indications that Mr. Mubarak is uneasy about the growing prestige and political clout of the military. Seven months ago he replaced several military men in his Cabinet with technocrats.

Marshal Abu Ghazala, undoubtedly the No. 2 man in Egypt, recently turned down Mr. Mubarak's offer of the vice presidency because he would have had to give up his power base, the defense ministry.

The offer was all the more surprising because Mr. Mubarak had been reported to be increasingly uneasy with his popular defense minister. Some observers took it as a failed ploy by the president to separate Marshal Abu Ghazala from the army.

Professor Joyce Starr, director of Near East studies at the Georgetown University Center for Strategic and International Studies, has observed the marshal's popularity among his staff.

"The people around him are devoted to him," she said.

"He is the most charismatic of the potential candidates to the succession. When he talks, you listen.

"I remember quite distinctly the aura in the room when he walked in. People sat up and paid attention."

Ms. Starr described the marshal as "a hard-working, hard-driving guy doing his job. He's smart, and has shown good judgment.

"He's popular in Egypt," she said, noting that he was regarded as a war hero and a dedicated patriot who was not self-serving. He puts in long hours on the job at army headquarters.

"He is very articulate, very cool and analytical," she said.

Ms. Starr found Marshal Abu Ghazala very respectful toward President Mubarak. But another Washington analyst and close observer of Egyptian affairs disagreed.

"The relationship between him and Mubarak has not been a comfortable one," he said. "There is a sense of the ineffectiveness of Mubarak. Mustapha Khalil, [who was] Sadat's premier, a heavyweight in Mubarak's party, feels that."

President Anwar Sadat appointed Marshal Abu Ghazala defense minister in March 1981, seven months before his assassination, when the previous defense minister, Lt. Gen. Ahmed Badawi, was killed in a helicopter crash along with 13 other top officers of the army high command.

Mr. Sadat was gunned down by Islamic fundamentalists in the army while reviewing a parade on Oct. 6, 1981. Marshal Abu Ghazala, who was standing beside him, was injured. Mr. Mubarak, who was standing on the other side, was unhurt.

A war hero, Marshal Abu Ghazala, 56, graduated from the Egyptian Military Academy in 1949 and studied war tactics in Moscow from 1957 to 1961. He was artillery commander for the Egyptian 2nd Army on the northern sector of the Suez Canal during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, and served as chief of staff before taking over as defense minister.

As chief of staff, and as military attache in Washington during the 1970s, Marshal Abu Ghazala played a key role in forging Egyptian-American military co-operation.

During his tenure in Washington, he delivered a series of lectures at the U.S. Army War College at Carlisle, Pa. In 1979 he was made an honorary graduate of the war college, the first non-American officer to be so honored.

He was not, however, personally involved in the 1979 Camp David

accords with Israel and was content to distance himself from all the normalization agreements that followed, one observer said.

He described the defense minister as "a man of considerable talent and pro-Western; a man who has clear aspirations for the presidency."

He noted that the marshal had very little contact with the Israelis.

"He was never very prominent [in the negotiations between Israel and Egypt.] That in itself is interesting," the source said.

Under Marshal Abu Ghazala, the military commander of the Sinai, Gen. Gihad, generated widespread hostile attitudes toward Israeli tourists that built up to last October's Ras Burka massacre, Israeli observers have noted. The subsequent rift between the Sinai commander and Egyptian tourism authorities became common knowledge.

Matters came to a head on Oct. 5 when Suleiman Khater, a Central Security Force policeman in the Sinai, killed seven Israeli tourists, including four children and two women. Sentenced to life imprisonment, he nevertheless became a popular hero in Egypt before being found dead in his cell in January.

After the killings, Jerusalem Post man asked: "Was Ras Burka the unforeseeable act of a madman... or was it a function of the overall feeling of officially endorsed hostility that has been allowed to permeate the Sinai?"

Marshal Abu Ghazala led the purge of Islamic fundamentalist elements from the army after Mr. Sadat's murder in October 1981. But there have been hints that he may now be handling them with velvet gloves.

The marshal reportedly has permitted mosques to be built inside military encampments. Moreover, his wife reportedly supports fundamentalist practices.

When the February police mutiny broke out, some Cairenes wondered if senior soldiers had not egged it on, according to the London Economist. One Western intelligence source described the scene in Cairo as "tailor-made for an army takeover," the magazine reported.

Even President Mubarak's top adviser, Osama el-Baz, warned: "What matters is to overcome this [the mutiny] without turning the country into a dictatorship or a police state."

The charismatic defense minister may indeed be an emerging leader. But whatever his previous close associations with the United States, evidence suggests he is first and foremost a patriot who can be relied on to put Egypt's interests first — however he sees them.